

Lament of Ahmad Khani: A Study of the Historical Struggle of the Kurds for an Independent Kurdistan

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The Kurdish poet Sheikmous Hasan, better known as Cigerxwin, wrote these words as part of his much larger work, *Who Am I?* while living in exile in Sweden.

“I am the proud Kurd, the enemies’ enemy, the friend of peace-loving ones. I am of noble race, not wild as they claim. My mighty ancestors were free people. Like them I want to be free and that is why I fight, for the enemy won’t leave in peace and I don’t want to be forever oppressed.”¹

Although Hasan, who died in 1984, was a modern voice for Kurdish nationalism, he is merely one of a chorus of Kurds reaching back centuries crying out for a free and independent Kurdish state, unofficially named Kurdistan.

Although the concept of nationalism is common today, the cries of the Kurds for their own state reach back centuries, the first written example coming from the Kurdish poet Ahmad Khani in his national epic *Mem-o-Zin* in 1695. *Mem-o-Zin* actually predates the French Revolution of 1789, which is often thought to be the true beginning of the concept of a national state. Despite having conceived of nationalism for the Kurds nearly a century ahead of France and the rest of Western Europe, the Kurds lack a state of their own.

What are the origins of Kurdish nationalist thought and how has it evolved over the years? To answer this question, we will track the evolution of Kurdish nationalist thought from its origins during the Ottoman Empire,

through World War I and up to the present by looking at the three successor states of the Ottoman Empire that contain the largest Kurdish populations: Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. There have been numerous attempts to create a Kurdish state in the past, but they have failed. Why did these attempts fail and what challenges exist in the here and now to the creation of an independent Kurdish state? Will it be impossible to create a viable Kurdish state unless the Kurds have access to the oil fields in Northern Iraq and the government in Turkey relieves pressure on its Kurdish minority? Further, could a Kurdish state survive without gaining the recognition of groups like the UN, the EU, the Arab League, and of individual states such as the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran?

Origins of the Kurds and the Ottoman Empire:

Early Kurdish history up to the beginning of the Ottoman Empire is a rich tapestry and can easily fill several volumes in and of itself. We will, however, focus on several factors that affect Kurdish identity and relations to this day. Genealogically, the Kurds can be traced to the Medes who ruled over the Persians, or modern day Iranians, circa 613BCE. The Persians eventually conquered the Medians, sowing the historical tension from this era that continues to exist to this day.²

The Kurds' location in the Middle East, situated between the Ottoman Empire and Persia, afforded them the position buffer zone between the powers. Although most Kurdish areas fell under Ottoman control, the Kurds gained autonomy by helping fight the Persians and paying tribute in the early 1500s. Then, in order to gain further autonomy for their regions under Persian control, the central and southern areas, they helped the Persians fight the Uzbeks, again in the 1500s.³ This helped to foment the early nationalist ideal that we see presented in Khani's *Mem-o-Zin*. National heroes such as Saladin, whose ethnicity as a Kurd is often ignored and who defeated the Crusaders in Jerusalem in 1187, aided in supporting this belief of an independent and unified Kurdish people. Yet it is important to point out that this principle of ethnicity was only associated with rulers and tribal elite, not the common peasant.⁴ The relative autonomy and the isolation of Kurdish nationalist thought would remain the status quo for centuries.

In 1804, the expanding Russian Empire made its presence known in the Middle East by waging war against the Persians. The result of this war was not only the cession of some Kurdish lands to Russia, but the introduction of new technologies to the Middle East. Over the next half century, the Kurdish leaders watched as their autonomy was stripped away by the Ottomans, Persians, and the Russians, who, using modern technology,

could better exploit and control the Kurds from great distances.⁵ The Kurdish territories essentially became colonies of these great powers. These new colonies were administrated the same way most colonies are: by force.

The Ottoman Empire, during the period from 1820 to 1890, often sent forces to quell Kurdish uprisings, such as in Amadiya in the 1840s.⁶ The last great rebellion took place in the 1870s led by Sheikh Ubaydullah who united the Kurds in Persia and after being exiled, continued to lead the battle against the Persian Shah.⁷ Of all the insurrections that took place during this period, the 1839 rebellion led by Prince Muhammad of Rewanduz and the 1847 rebellion of Bedir Khan Pasha of Botan were the biggest threat and required the help of British and Germans to be stopped.⁸ There are many modern day Kurds who see these insurrections as the genesis of a true nationalist movement amongst the Kurds. Yet, these rebellions did not take place in an intellectual vacuum.

Ahmad Khani, as mentioned before, produced the first accepted work of Kurdish nationalism, but there were other thinkers who fueled the fire as well. The Kurdish poet Haji Qadiri Koyi, who died in 1897, argued from within the Ottoman Empire not only for the necessity of a Kurdish state, but for the use of the sword and the pen to achieve it.⁹ Koyi's theory was that one of the ways to gain a Kurdish state was through the pen. Prince Medhat Beg shared Koyi's belief. Acting on that belief, Prince Beg published the first Kurdish language newspaper, *Kurdistan* in 1898.¹⁰ An interesting side note is that the original editor of the newspaper *Kurdistan* was Miqdad Madhad Bedir Khan Pasha, a descendent of the same Bedir Khan Pasha who led the 1847 revolt.

The Ottoman Empire, like the other Axis Powers, found itself among the vanquished powers following World War I. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was a champion of the idea of "Self Determination" for all nationalities living within the borders of the now defunct empires.¹¹ By the end of World War I in 1918, many politicians and academics like Wilson were arguing that one of the reasons for World War I was the multi-national nature of the defeated empires of the Germans, Ottomans, and Austro-Hungarians. They believed that the only way to prevent another war was to give all nationalities their own states. Seizing the opportunity, Kurdish General Sherif Pasha from the Ottoman Empire traveled to the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 to push for the independence of the Kurdish people.¹² Much to the relief of Pasha and the Kurdish people, both his calls and those of Wilson were heard.

The Treaty of Sevres signed on August 10, 1920, by the victorious powers of World War I and the Ottoman Empire, recognized the right for a

Kurdish state, Kurdistan, in Section III of the treaty. The boundaries of Kurdistan outlined in Article 62 are,

“...for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia...”¹³

The size of Kurdistan could be increased in 1922 if the large Kurdish population in what would become Iraq voted to join their compatriots to the north.

With the signing of the Treaty of Serves, it appeared that the Kurds had finally achieved that for which Ahmad Khani had argued: an independent Kurdish state. Little did they realize that their hopes would soon be dashed.

Turkey and the Kurds:

The large area in eastern Turkey that was promised to the Kurds by the Treaty of Sevres was an area that was once held jointly by both Kurds and Armenians. During the period of 1915 and 1921, however, many Armenians were either forced from the land or executed in what many agree was an attempt at genocide by the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ The Kurds, some of who helped in this genocide, were now in the majority in the region. As a result of the Treaty of Sevres and the leaders of the defeated Ottoman Empire, it appeared that the Kurds would finally have their state, but they weren't the only peoples experiencing a rebirth of nationalism.

Following World War I, a Turkish nationalist movement swept through what is now Turkey. This movement was a direct reaction to territorial losses Turkey suffered at the hands of the Treaty of Sevres. Mustafa Kemal Pasha, leader of the National Party, established an opposition government to the Sultan's, which had signed the treaty. He fought a guerilla war against the Allied forces of Greece, Britain, France, and Italy from 1921 until 1922, effectively routing their forces in Turkey. His success against the Greeks led to the withdrawal of French and Italian Allied forces in Southern Anatolia. With Mustafa Kemal Pasha now in control of Turkey, he forced a new peace conference with the Allies that led to the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed on July 24, 1923.¹⁵ These events changed the course of Kurdish independence.

Mustafa Kemal Pasha, later to be known as Ataturk or “Father of the Turks,” after 1934, came to power fighting the idea of a division of Turkey itself. His idea was to create a modern secular state, and he needed all of Turkey to accomplish it. Independence of the Kurds in eastern Turkey was simply unacceptable because of the additional territorial loss to the already diminished territory of the Turks. Ataturk believed that since the government that had signed the Treaty of Sevres was no longer in power, neither he nor Turkey had to abide by it. Normally, this would have caused greater outrage amongst the Allies than it did, yet there is one major reason that such a reaction was not provoked.

Many scholars place the dismal fate of the Kurds on the British. While the Treaty of Lausanne was being debated, the British seized the central area of what would have been Kurdistan after discovering oil. Had there been an independent Kurdish state to the north of Iraq, it would have endangered British holdings.¹⁶ Thus, when the Treaty of Lausanne made no mention of the Kurds or any other minority by name, they simply turned the other way. As a nod to the previous Treaty of Sevres, however, the European powers made mention of minority rights in the Treaty of Lausanne, but they were blatantly ignored by Turkey.¹⁷ The Treaty of Lausanne, however, allowed the Turks to carry out their plans to create a unified and homogenous country.

The first in a long history of oppressive actions of the Turks against the Kurds began with a March 3, 1924 decree that banned all Kurdish schools, organizations, and publications, as well as all religious seminaries and fraternities.¹⁸ This was a first attempt by the Turks to assimilate the Kurds. Additionally, from 1925 to 1928, there were mass deportations and resettlements of over 500,000 Kurds to locations outside of Kurdistan.¹⁹ Overall, the Turks believed if they wiped out the means to spread Kurdish culture and spread the Kurds throughout Turkey, they would wipe out the Kurds as well.

The worst incident of Kurdish repression took place in Dersim on the heels of a Kurdish rebellion between 1936 and 1939. Using the uprising as an excuse, the Turks attempted to obliterate all Kurdish opposition and culture.²⁰ All villages that had taken part in the insurrection were razed to the ground, and the region was renamed Tunceli. The word Kurd vanished from the Turkish language, and the Kurds became “Mountain Turks.”²¹ Finally, the region was closed to foreigners until 1965. During this period from 1939 to 1965, the idea of Kurdish nationalism appeared to vanish in Turkey due to state suppression. It was not until the 1960s that it returned.

In the early 1960s the world was awash in Leftist revolutions and Rightist responses, and Turkey was not immune. Although the Kurds no longer technically existed, they still used their language and practiced their traditions. As a result, Colonel Turkes, one of the leaders of the 1960 Rightist coup, threatened to wipe out the Kurds like they did the Armenians in 1915.²² In 1961, however, a new constitution was passed, replacing the strict military rule that had viewed the Kurds as a major threat. The new government allowed the Kurdish population a form of indirect representation.²³ This newfound freedom allowed for the rise of new political parties, thinkers, and leaders within the Turkish Kurd populations.

Although the 1961 constitution ended the military coup rule, it was not the last time the military would intervene. Since 1961, there have been three additional instances of the military coups taking place in 1971, 1980, 1997. Generally, the coups took place simply because the military did not like the leaders in power or felt that the country was headed in the wrong direction. The 1980 coup, however, occurred in part because of fear of a Kurdish resurgence, fueled by the founding of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978.²⁴

The 1990s have led to numerous clashes between the Kurds and the Turks. The bulk of these challenges deal with the PKK and the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. Additionally, Turkey, which is now in talks to join the European Union, must not only acknowledge its past abuses of the Kurds, but it must now work hard to integrate them while giving them cultural freedom. This is contrary to how the Turkish government has traditionally reacted to the Kurds.

When one studies the leaders of Kurdish nationalism in the last century, it is important to understand two things. First, borders of the states created from the Ottoman Empire were created by the Europeans, not the existing national groups. And second, because of these artificial borders, the nationalist movements are not isolated to a single country, but extend their influence to the other countries in which Kurds are present. Therefore, I have had to create somewhat artificial boundaries for some of these leaders and thinkers. When studying the Kurdish nationalists, I will divide them up along the lines of what country they affected the most with their ideas or what countries in which they spent the bulk of their time.

The first Kurdish nationalist effort following the Treaty of Sevres was the Committee for Kurdish Independence founded in 1922.²⁵ The founders of the Committee were Yusuf Ziya Bey and Colonel Halit Bey. Their push for an independent Kurdish state was cut short, however, with the March 3, 1924 decree which effectively banned them. The two men were arrested on

October 10 and December 20, respectively, and executed in late March, 1925. Their execution most likely went hand in hand with the uprising of Sheikh Sa'id in March 1925.

Sheikh Sa'id was a chief of the Sunni Naqshbandi Sufi order that started a Kurdish uprising in March of 1925. Although initially successful, it was limited, like most early Kurdish movements, by tribal rivalry. Many argue that although the bulk of the people in the uprising were Kurds, the movement was against the modernization and secularization of Ataturk.²⁶

Perhaps the biggest threat to Ataturk was the Khoyboun, the first known Kurdish political party. Founded in Paris in 1918 by aristocrats and intellectuals, the Khoyboun created a government in exile in 1927 and started a two year rebellion in 1928. Led by Ihsan Nuri Pasha, the Khoyboun movement centered around seeking an end to Kurdish tribal rivalry and the creation of a single independent state with secular inclinations.²⁷

Following the repression by the Turkish government, the Kurds had to wait until the 1960s to create a new political party. Yet, the next major thinker and political figure to arise would not appear until 1974 when the PKK was formed by Adullah Ocalan. Ocalan's PKK was founded as a Marxist-Leninist party. Ocalan designed it not only to fight for a Kurdish state, but for freedom from class distinction, feudalism, and colonialism.²⁸ Some would argue that recent military crack downs by the Turkish government are directly connected to the PKK and their actions in Turkish Kurdistan.

As previously mentioned, the 1980 military coup was in part, a response to the PKK. Since the PKK returned to Turkey in 1983, they have engaged in sporadic combat with Turkey's military and police as well as kidnappings of local officials and collaborators. After the 1991 Gulf War, the PKK started to use the lawless borderlands with Iraq to avoid the Turks, leading to Turkish incursions into northern Iraq.²⁹

Turkey has long oppressed the Kurdish people, but one could argue that, at least initially, it was because the Turks themselves were emerging from a form of colonialism imposed by the Allies after World War I. As the Turks worked to unify their people, the act of pushing out the Greek, French, and Italian troops helped to cement the Turkish identity. The Kurds, once again facing the reality of being a colonized people, were united in their own nationalism as they fought a force that attempted to wipe out their cultural identity.

Now the tables have turned on Turkey. Turkey must admit to its past wrong doings and attempt to give the Kurds at least a measure of understanding if it wishes to join the European Union. In order to do this,

Turkey must demonstrate full compliance with the European Commission of Human Rights, which in turn protects the Kurdish minority. What this means for the future of the Kurds of Turkey remains to be seen, but one thing is for certain. Whatever happens, it is sure to reach beyond Turkey and affect another state with a large Kurdish minority, Iran.

The Kurds in Iran:

The situation of the Kurds in Iran is one that can be called in some ways poetically just. As previously mentioned in the brief overview of ancient Kurdish history, the ancestors of today's Kurds ruled over the ancestors of today's Iranians. Although not as widely broadcast in the media as the Kurds in Iraq or Turkey, the Kurds in Iran have historically come the closest to regaining that which was promised in the Treaty of Sevres. Perhaps the reason for their partial success has been their relatively isolated location in northwestern Iran, or perhaps it has been from outside help. Whatever the reason, the Kurds were able to do something in Iran that they were never able to do anywhere else in the Middle East: declare the creation of an independent Kurdish Republic.

Unlike many of the modern day nations in the Middle East with Kurdish populations, Iran was not created out of the territorial remains of the Ottoman Empire. Territorially, the borders of modern Iran roughly correspond to those of the ancient Persian Empire, though it was unofficially carved into Soviet and British spheres of influence. Yet nestled in the northwest of Iran is the predominantly Kurdish region that would have become eastern Kurdistan according to the Treaty of Sevres.³⁰

During World War I, the government of Iran had very little control over events happening within its own borders. Kurdish tribal leaders took advantage of this by increasing their own power through confederations between tribes and raiding rivals and non-ethnic Kurds.³¹ We also see, because of a weak central government, that the shah was only able to maintain control in the cities, but not in the countryside where rebellions tend to start.

We would expect at this point for some sort of coherent nationalist thought to appear. The strongest leader to emerge at this time was a semi-nationalist Kurdish chief named Isma'il Agha Simko. An affluent tribal chief, Simko established an independent Kurdish government in western Iran, south of Lake Urmieh in 1918. Although his power was actually based upon tribal loyalty, Simko himself appeared to display nationalist leanings. During his reign he published a journal called *Independent Kurdistan*, dedicated to Kurdish self-determination, and worked to create a

Kurdish state. He received support from Kurds in both Turkey and Iraq. The truth, however, is that Simko lacked a true message and fought more for power for his tribe and for himself rather than for nationalism, though many of those fighting, especially from Turkey and Iraq, more than likely fought for a nationalist ideal.³² For a while it looked as if Simko might succeed in creating his own Kurdish state, but that would soon all change.

In 1921, while Mustafa Kemal Pasha was fighting against Allied forces in Turkey, a military officer named Reza Khan, later to become Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, deposed the then sitting shah of Iran in a military coup.³³ Reza Khan moved quickly to consolidate his power. One of the moves he made was creating a modern army, which he then used to rout Simko's forces in 1922, putting an end to the rebellion, a task that the previous shah and his forces had been unable to accomplish. Another attempt to consolidate power was Reza Khan's policy of land registration in 1926, which worked to weaken tribal leaders and to force tribes to settle in permanent communities. The result for the Kurds was a radical change in lifestyle. Most Kurds had been migrant herders up to this point, and the land reform led to the emergence of two separate Kurdish classes: the poor farm laborers and rich land owners.³⁴ This and other tough policies by Reza Shah led to the emergence of true nationalism and intellectualism among Iranian Kurds.

With the Allied invasion in 1940 and the subsequent replacement of the Axis-sympathetic Reza Shah by his Allied favored son Mohammed Reza Shah in 1941, Iran came to know the harsh reality of World War II.³⁵ Kurdish unity across all borders finally became official in 1944 with representatives from Iran, Iraq, and Turkey meeting at Mount Dalanpar. Then, less than a year later, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) was formed in Iran and led by Qazi Mohammad.³⁶

Mohammad was the leader of the KDP and the son of a powerful Iranian Kurdish family. After assuming the leadership of the KDP, he was faced with the familiar problem of bringing together both the urban Kurds and the conservative tribal chiefs. A fierce Kurdish nationalist, Qazi Mohammad urged his people to stick together, not to trust the Persians, and not to stand in the way of any Kurd who could lead the Kurdish people.³⁷

The Kurdish leaders in Iran, such as Qazi Muhammad, decided to seize upon the weakened state of the shah, much like Simko had, and declared the creation of an independent Kurdish state on December 15, 1945. This state, commonly known as the Mahabad Republic, elected Qazi Muhammad as its first and only president.³⁸ The Mahabad Republic

represented a beacon of hope for Kurdish nationalism. Unfortunately, for the Kurds of the Mahabad Republic, that beacon would soon be snuffed out.

The Mahabad Republic existed as the result of Soviet forces in Iran. The Soviets, in an attempt to destabilize Iran, had also set up an Azerbaijani republic right next to Mahabad. Additionally, it is widely believed that the Soviet Union actually planned on annexing both of the republics once Iran gave up on them.³⁹ Yet there were additional problems to the Mahabad Republic. Due to its abrupt creation, Mahabad was backward in the economic, social, cultural, and political realms.⁴⁰ Another problem was the socialist beliefs of the KDP, which were in opposition to many of the conservative tribes. To bolster his position, Qazi Mohammad turned to Iraqi Kurdish fighters, known as pershmerga, leader Mustafa Barzani, whom we will discuss when we talk about Iraq. Although their ideologies differed, Barzani hoped that by helping in Iran, he could help his cause back home.⁴¹

By the fall of 1946, things looked bleak for the Mahabad Republic. Soviet forces had withdrawn, as had Barzani. Iranian forces occupied Mahabad on December 14, 1946. On March 31, 1947, Qazi Mohammad and his fellow leaders were publicly executed by hanging in the attempt to snuff out the independence hopes of Kurds.⁴² The decades following the fall of the Mahabad Republic offered glimmers of hope coupled with disaster.

When Mohammed Mossadegh gained power in Iran in 1951, the KDP began lobbying for independence, but all efforts to this end were suspended with the 1953 coup that ousted Mossadegh. The Shah in turn began to fiercely crack down on the Kurds by banning their political parties and limiting what they could broadcast on the radio. This was followed by another minor Kurdish revolution in 1967, which was quickly quelled.⁴³

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 offered new hope for the Kurds. Having helped to overthrow the Shah, the Kurds believed Ayatollah Khomeini would grant autonomy for their people. Khomeini, however, rejected the request on the grounds that Kurdish autonomy would go against the ideal of a unified Islamic community. Khomeini also claimed that the Islamic Revolution was as nationalist as it was religious and Kurdish autonomy would disturb that as well.⁴⁴

During the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, the Iranian Kurds received arms from Iraq and Turkey to fight against the forces of Khomeini so they could gain their freedom. Until the war began, Khomeini had intended to deal with his Kurdish problem by force, but his plans were placed on hold until 1982. Then, in 1984, a massive Iranian offensive devastated the Kurdish region ending all viable resistance.⁴⁵ Little data about the Kurds in Iran following the Iran-Iraq war has become public, but what

few documents have trickled out seem to indicate additional instances of minor uprisings and terrorism followed by repression.

There exist two major Kurdish political parties in Iran. The first party is the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, also known as the Kurdish Democratic Party or the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iran. The reason for the addition of the “in Iran” to the KDP was because when Barzani returned to Iraq, he used the name KDP to consolidate his power.⁴⁶ The KDP in Iran, however, has very little in common with its sister party. The KDP in Iran is basically an urban and elitist group, with moderate tribal connections.⁴⁷ Its stated goals are the creation of a socialist democratic society, the right of peoples of Iran to self-determination, gender equality, and separation of religion and state.⁴⁸

The other party is Komala. Komala was the original name of the KDP. After the formation of the KDP in Iran, it vanished until the fall of 1969. The new Komala is strongly Marxist-Leninist.⁴⁹ The party fights for democratic freedoms, civil rights, and women’s rights. In the summer of 2000, the party split into two groups, Komala and the significantly weaker Revolutionary Organization of People of Kurdistan.⁵⁰

Unfortunately for the Kurds, their attempts to create a sustained Kurdish state have been thwarted mainly because the Kurds are trying to break off a piece of their colonizers’ country, rather than one of its colonial territories. Iran has helped light the nationalist fire, but it is no longer the most likely place for the birth of an independent Kurdistan. For that, we must turn to what would have been the center of the original Kurdistan promised in the Treaty of Sevres, what is now northern Iraq.

Iraq and Hope?:

The Kurdish population in Iraq is perhaps the most well known in the world. Populating primarily northeastern Iraq, the Kurds of this region occupy what was to have been central Kurdistan, according to the Treaty of Sevres. The main reason these particular Kurds have become well known is because of the part they’ve played in every war Iraq has taken part in during the last quarter century. Truth be told, however, the particular plight of these Kurds goes back to the very founding of Iraq. This Kurdish population has been the center of repression for numerous reasons, including the one reason why a Kurdish state may actually be viable: oil.

Northeastern Iraq is territory that, according to the Treaty of Sevres, possessed the option of voting to become part of Kurdistan in 1922 had it not been for the Turkish nationalist uprising. With the loss of Kurdistan in eastern Turkey, the British did not see the point in letting the Kurds vote to

join a nonexistent entity, so they incorporated them into their sphere of influence along with Iraq, though the actual fate of the Kurdish territory would not be resolved until 1926.⁵¹

From the very beginning, the British faced complications with the Kurdish region. In 1918, the British appointed Sheikh Mahmud, a member of an illustrious Sufi house to subdue and supervise the Kurds for the new British mandate for Iraq. Sheikh Mahmud, however, quickly turned on the British.⁵² Constant unrest in the area, partially because of the separatist aims of Sheikh Mahmud, was initially quelled by the British Royal Air Force in the winter of 1919-1920.⁵³ This gave the Kurds the dubious honor of being the first civilian targets of aerial bombardment. The British eventually captured Sheikh Mahmud and exiled him to India.

Sheikh Mahmud returned to Sulaymania in 1922 to head a “Free Kurdistan Movement,” which declared independence for Iraqi Kurdistan with him as king. The problem with Mahmud, however, was that he represented the old order of tribal chiefs. Although there is evidence that four out of five Iraqi Kurds supported Sheikh Mahmud’s calls for an independent Kurdistan, the more modern Kurds living in the south blamed people like him and his traditional values for the Kurds present suffering. On the other side, conservative tribal chiefs saw little difference in surrendering their power to either him or the British. Eventually, the vast majority of Sheikh Mahmud’s support dissolved when the Turks invaded in 1924.⁵⁴ Sheikh Mahmud continued fighting, leading several more minor insurrections, before dying in 1931.

The dispute over the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan was finally settled by the League of Nations in 1926. Citing the cruel treatment of the Kurds by the Turks, the territory was officially incorporated into northeastern Iraq. The League also insisted that Iraq give the Kurdish regions cultural and social autonomy.⁵⁵ These rights were ignored when Iraq was finally given independence in 1932.⁵⁶

Mustafa Barzani became the major force in Kurdish politics. Barzani, as we have already seen, helped protect the Mahabad Republic in Iran during its brief existence in 1945. Prior to his work in Iran, Barzani had led a two year revolt in Iraq. After the collapse of the Mahabad Republic, Barzani fled to the Soviet Union. Following a revolution in Baghdad in 1958, Mustafa Barzani returned home to help fight alongside the new government that declared the Kurds partners.⁵⁷ This declaration of partnership is not surprising in and of itself because the leader of the military forces that had overthrown the king was Abdul Karim Qasim, a man thought to be an Arabized Kurd.⁵⁸

The solidarity the Kurds and Arabs in Iraq had agreed to quickly dissipated when, in 1961, a Kurdish rebellion broke out. The Kurds had decided once again to move beyond autonomy in Iraq and push for full blown independence. Then, in 1963, Barzani and his forces declared the creation of a Kurdish liberation zone in northeastern Iraq.⁵⁹ Two more coups occurred in Iraq during the 1960s.

Ultimately it would be the Ba'ath party that gained control of Iraq in 1968. The Ba'ath party, based on the ideology of Michel Aflaq, promoted the concept of Arab nationalism. Although Aflaq knew such a concept frightened minorities like the Kurds and himself, he felt that the Kurds could be integrated into a new Iraq just the same as any minority group in Arab territory.⁶⁰ On March 11, 1970, then Ba'ath party member Saddam Hussein entered into negotiations with Barzani and his KDP. The agreement called for Kurdish to be the second national language and a Kurdish autonomous region to be established in the north.⁶¹

The treaty turned out to be a ruse. Less than a year after signing the agreement, there was an attempt on Barzani's life, which was initially blamed on the leader of the Kurdish opposition party led by Jalal Talabani. In 1974, after the Kurdish autonomous region was created, the laws governing it turned out to be vastly different than those promised in the March 1970 agreement. Using the creation of the autonomous region as an excuse, Barzani, with aid from the Shah of Iran, launched another rebellion against the Ba'ath party, only to be sold out by his ally in 1975 with the signing of the Algiers Accord between Iraq and Iran. Barzani went into exile in Tehran and died in 1978.⁶²

Arguably, at this point the Kurds in Iraq lost their greatest nationalist. Barzani had the most influence and led the most successful fight thus far for a Kurdish state. Things were about to get worse, however, with the coming of the Iraq-Iran War starting in 1980.

Initially, the Iraqis were making impressive strides in the Iraq-Iran war, partially because of confusion that followed the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. The Kurds in Iraq, however, openly supported Iran, especially since most of the funding for the KDP came from Tehran. This damaged the already poor image of the Kurds with many Arab Iraqis but it did not become a major issue until the Iranians began to turn the tide of the war. Desperate, Saddam Hussein, now leader of the Ba'ath party, sought to spite the Kurds of the KDP by striking a deal with the other major Kurdish party in 1984, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The deal was quashed, however, when Turkey, whose oil pipelines Iraq needed for exports, objected with fears that the Kurds would have too much autonomy.⁶³ Yet,

despite the casualties the Kurds faced in the Iraq-Iran War, one of the worst episodes in Kurdish history was still to be written.

Beginning in 1987, Hussein initiated what was known as the Anfal campaign. Anfal roughly translates to “unbeliever” in the Koran. As such, the campaign consisted of eight distinctive offensives occurring in six predominantly Kurdish areas. It included the destruction of thousands of villages, executions, and the use of chemical weapons. What is important to note, however, is that the Anfal was not a reaction to Kurdish support for Iran in the war; it merely gave Hussein an excuse. The campaign itself was thought out years in advance of the Iraq-Iran War and used modern tactics and equipment.⁶⁴ The number of Kurds killed in the campaign is estimated by Middle East Watch as between 50,000 and 100,000; Kurds claim it to be as high as 182,000. Ali Hasan al-Majid, leader of Anfal operations, claims the number is no more than 100,000.⁶⁵ It was the Anfal that helped galvanize the Kurds to make their next move toward independence.

The forces of Iraq were severely diminished in the Persian Gulf War that began in 1990 and ended in 1991. Kurds and Shiites, both encouraged by the words of U.S. President George H.W. Bush, rose up against Hussein believing they would get support from the U.S. The Kurdish uprising began in March 1991. The Iraqi forces, after crushing the more serious Shiite uprising in the south, turned north, leading to a mass exodus of Kurds into the surrounding states to escape retaliations from the Iraqi forces.⁶⁶

In retaliation to Hussein’s crushing of the rebellions both in the north and south, the UN passed a resolution allowing the Allies, mainly the U.S. and Britain, to set up no-fly zones. Ironically, the Northern No-Fly Zone, which was meant for the Kurds, left out roughly two thirds of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶⁷ In May 1992 a Regional Administration was established in Irbil with the help of the UN and U.S., making the region into a proto-state. Immediately, the unity of the Kurds began to break apart, and fighting between the PUK and the KDP erupted in 1994, with relative unity returning in 1996 with an invasion from Hussein’s forces.⁶⁸

The government of Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003 by a coalition led primarily by U.S. and British forces. On April 10, 2003, the Kurds aided the U.S. in the assault on Kirkuk, Iraq’s fourth largest city and the controlling center of the Kirkuk oil fields.⁶⁹ During the 2004 elections for the Iraqi transitional government, the Kurds of Kirkuk had hoped for a low turnout in the election so they could bolster their chances of gaining greater influence in the new government.⁷⁰ Since that time, the Kurds have worked hard with the Shiites and Sunnis to help create a new constitution from which to help rule Iraq.⁷¹ The constitution, which was passed on

October 25, 2005, grants the Kurds, as well as the Shiites and Sunni, a large degree of autonomy, though it states that Iraq is one state with many nationalities. This autonomy, which the Kurds have essentially maintained since 1992 because of the no-fly zone, includes such rights as taxation and manning a police force. Additionally, Iraqi Kurdistan has been allowed to keep all rights and laws it has possessed since 1992 unless it contradicts the new Iraqi Constitution.⁷² The current president of Iraq is Jalal Talabani, the leader of the PUK.

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was started in 1976 by Talabani as an offshoot of the Kurdish Democratic Party. In order to compete with the stronger KDP, the PUK expanded its base to include almost every ideology possible. It has conservative, center, and Marxist factions. The PUK has often negotiated with the government in Baghdad, though it was never successful, and has come into armed conflict with the KDP several times as well.⁷³ Since the fall of Hussein, the PUK has pushed forward on a platform for "...the right of self-determination for the Kurdish people within a unified democratic Iraq."⁷⁴

The main opposition of the PUK is the KDP. The KDP in Iraq was created by Ibrahim Ahmad at the urging of Barzani while he was in Iran. Ahmad controlled the party until he was ousted by Barzani in a 1964 internal coup. The KDP is mainly urban elitist, though its military power actually comes from northern Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the death of Mustafa Barzani, the line of control was passed to Barzani's eldest son, Idris, and then to Masoud in 1987, who has headed the party ever since.⁷⁵ The KDP seeks to "...achieve all basic human and national rights... and to support all democratic principles for all ethnic, and other, oppressed peoples."⁷⁶ Pushing hard for an independent Kurdish state, Masoud Barzani, president of Iraqi Kurdistan, stated on November 18, 2005 with regard to the present insurgency in Iraq, "May God save us from civil war, but if others start fighting among themselves and there is an outbreak, we will have no other alternative (but to proclaim independence)."⁷⁷

Iraqi Kurdistan is presently the strongest candidate for an independent Kurdish state. It is, however, part of Iraq and seems intent on staying there, at least on paper. Yet the words of leaders like Masoud Barzani indicate that it might be headed toward independence, especially considering it has been a proto-state for more than a decade. Additionally, Iraqi Kurdistan has been described by many visitors as a thriving region of Iraq and relatively secure. So the question remains, especially with the recent statement of Barzani, will Iraqi Kurdistan declare independence, and if it does, what will a Kurdish state look like?

Kurdistan in the Future?:

The main problem with questioning what a Kurdish state might look like is that the answer is dependent entirely upon asking, "From what country will an independent Kurdistan emerge?" Presently, Iraqi Kurdistan looks to be the most promising prospect for an independent Kurdistan. If that were the case, then Kurdistan would be a democratic state blessed with a growing economy driven, in large part, by oil revenues and agriculture. But this would be true only if Kurdistan includes Kirkuk, which, now that Kurds are returning there in mass, would be almost a given. The autonomy they experienced since 1992, assisted by help received from the UN, has helped create a profitable region with great potential for growth.

Kurdistan may possibly emerge in either Turkey or Iran. Present conditions in both countries, however, make such a split look extremely improbable. Both governments are strong and very unlikely to allow for any more than an autonomous zone, though once again that sort of event is also unlikely due to the possibility of it sparking a violent push for Kurdish independence. Kurds are also found in numerous other countries, including Syria and Armenia, but their numbers are much smaller, as are their territorial possessions. Theoretically, if a Kurdish state were created, either from one of the three covered states or even all of them, what problems would an independent Kurdistan face?

Numerous problems abound with the possibility of a Kurdish state, including whether the state can even be viable. Assuming that the three largest Kurdish regions, those found in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, did declare themselves independent and unified, it would most likely lead to a massive uproar in the region. Already with the de facto autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey has issued statements to Iraq about its worries that a free Iraqi Kurdistan might lead to rebellions in their Kurdish region.⁷⁸ No doubt there would be a similar reaction in Iran, or even Iraq, if there were an attempt at secession. If the European powers fought tooth and nail against those they colonized who were fighting for nationalist freedom, why would Turkey, Iran, or Iraq be any different?

If Kurdistan were to have any chance of survival from an invasion, it would need the immediate backing of the UN, the European Union, the Arab League, the U.S., and Russia. The UN already has programs in many of the Kurdish areas that help the poor there and is helping to improve infrastructure. The European Union and the U.S. both have strong ties with Turkey, especially the European Union now that it entered into negotiations with Turkey regarding membership and has begun applying pressure

regarding the treatment of Turkish Kurd populations. Russian recognition would be required because Russia has closer ties to Iran than any of the other mentioned groups. Russian recognition could possibly dissuade Iranian aggression aimed at regaining lost territory.

The U.S. and its presence in Iraq might also make it easier to prevent armed retaliation against a seceding Kurdistan, though the U.S. and its allies want to keep Iraq whole. The KDP and the PUK have both stated that they wouldn't declare independence unless there was a civil war. If that were the case, the U.S. would have its hands full, if it were still present in Iraq at all. Another group that might be able to help with Iraq would be the Arab League. The Arab League might be able to help restrain any sort of Iraqi reaction. There are other problems, however, beside invasion that Kurdistan might have to face.

Kurdistan's viability is perhaps *the* question of paramount importance. Once again, let us assume that an independent Kurdistan will consist of the Kurdish territories from Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Geographically, Kurdistan would be in a poor location. Much of the land they inhabit is rugged and mountainous, yet it is the mountains that have sustained the Kurds as a people. Unfortunately, rugged mountains make for very difficult farming. A fledgling Kurdistan would require an influx of revenue separate from the charity it presently receives from the UN and other international organizations in order to improve its economy. This income could only currently be acquired with the inclusion of Iraqi Kurdistan and its oil. The oil, an economic god send, poses new problems to Kurdistan.

Kurdistan itself would be a landlocked state without any way to transport the afore-mentioned oil to the international market. Ideally, Kurdistan would simply use existing pipelines through Iraq and pay the government a fee, but if things in Kurdistan don't change, the Kurdish parties have stated they won't declare independence unless a civil war breaks out. A civil war would preclude the use of existing pipelines. The Kurds could build pipelines through Turkey, but considering the animosity between the Kurds and Turks, such a prospect looks even bleaker. Bad blood would not only exist between the states, but between the minorities in said states.

The Kurds are not the only people living in these so-called Kurdish territories, they are simply the majority there. Numerous ethnic groups, ranging from Turks and Arabs to Persians inhabit these lands as well. Although many would likely leave, for fear of reprisals, others would stay and fight. In the city of Kirkuk during the elections in 2004 for the transitional government, Omar Khattab, manager of the local National

Turkmen Movement office, said, “We are ready for anything...civil war has to come. The Kurds are four million, and we are three million. Our young men are ready to defend us.”⁷⁹ If Kurds in all three countries declare independence, they will not only have to fight with the minorities in their new state, but will most likely wind up fighting each other.

As previously mentioned, following the establishment of the no-fly zone in northern Iraq in 1992, the KDP and PUK started fighting each other. Although they seem to have worked out their differences for the time being, imagine what would happen when the Kurdish parties in all three countries try to unite and share power. The divergent views of these parties are so great that the possibility of a civil war is almost guaranteed. The Kurds, despite their cries for unity, are isolated in their causes because they are fighting three different enemies, and each group of Kurds has had to adjust their tactics and ideologies accordingly.

From its inception, a modern day, independent Kurdistan composed of the Kurdish regions from Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, would be a nearly destitute state under constant threat of attack from its neighbors and from within. Geographically isolated, it would be hard pressed to export any of its goods in order to improve its economic status. Unless there are some radical changes in the states surrounding what would be Kurdistan, and the Kurdish parties develop a coherent ideology across state lines, the dreams of Ahmad Khani and so many others will go unfulfilled.

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³ Ibid., 34-36.

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⁵ Izady, Mehrdad. The Kurds (Bristol: Taylor & Francis, Inc. 1992), 55-57.

⁶ Nisan, Mordechai. Minorities in the Middle East (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2002), 36.

⁷ Ciment, James. The Kurds (New York: Facts on File, Inc. 1996), 41.

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⁹ Allison, Christine and Philip Kreyenbroek. Kurdish Culture and Identity (Atlantic Highlands: Zed Books Ltd, 1996), 49.

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¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Nisan, Mordechai. Minorities in the Middle East (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2002), 37.

¹³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Treaties of Peace 1919-1923 Vol. 2. (New York: Carnegie, 1924), Treaty of Sevres.

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¹⁵ Bram, Leon L. “Turkey.” Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia. New York City: Funk & Wagnalls, Inc. 1975.

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- ⁶³ Ibid., 69.
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